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COLUMN: 'Only voice that child has'

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Posted: Monday, June 22, 2015 1:13 pm

Lynne McLean, Star Local Media contributor | **0 comments**



Courtesy of Katy Seitzler

Lynne McLean, Children's Advocacy Center of Collin County CEO



Posted on Jun 22, 2015 by **Chris Beattie**

Imagine you are 5 years old, and a person you love and trust does the unthinkable.

Imagine you are alone, told by this loved and trusted adult that the thing they did to hurt you was in fact your fault.

Imagine being afraid to go home at night because someone in your family has made it an unsafe place.

For too many children, this bleak scenario is not the stuff of imagination. It is stark reality.

Recent allegations and news stories centered on prominent TLC reality TV star Josh Duggar bring to light a chilling fact: child abuse is tragically underreported.

More than 4,800 Collin County children were reported to Child Protective Services as victims of child abuse last year. Across North Texas counties last year, more than 18,000 children were confirmed by CPS as victims of child abuse. And statewide? 66,572 CPS-confirmed victims of child abuse. Many more children were victimized in law enforcement-only cases that did not involve civil proceedings with CPS. Both adults and minors perpetrated these crimes, and in fact, youth-perpetrated crimes against other children are on the rise.

Only one in 10 children will ever tell of their abuse. Given these startling statistics, imagine how many more children may have suffered abuse alone. When a child finds the courage to tell a trusted adult they have been a victim of child abuse, they have given that adult a profound responsibility. The child has chosen a person with whom to share their secret. What will that trusted adult do with the information they have been given?

Every adult in the state of Texas is mandated by law to report suspected child abuse. You don't have to be certain abuse has occurred. Suspicion of abuse is reason to report.

Unlike in some states, there is no statute of limitations for criminal cases of aggravated sexual assault of a child, continuous sexual assault and sexual assault in the state of Texas.

The tireless efforts of Collin County legislators working with the Children's Advocacy Center during the 2015 legislative session have led to systemic changes that will better protect children, families and communities from sexual predators. For example, Texas now counts voyeurism not as trespassing but as a separate criminal offense, thanks to House Bill 207 (Rep. Jeff Leach, R-Plano,

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and Rep. Matt Shaheen, R-Plano). This distinction allows Texas communities to crack down on potential sex offenders and hopefully curb more violent crimes.

These recent changes advance the cause of child protection, but even these positive steps will do little to help keep children safe if adults do not follow the state mandate to report suspected abuse. It's up to us – all of us – to work together to keep children safe from harm and to make sure they receive help if they are hurt by abuse.

What can you do to help?

Educate yourself and others. Contact a Children's Advocacy Center in your area to learn about educational opportunities for children, parents and child-serving professionals and volunteers. Go to onewithcourage.org to find a Children's Advocacy Center in your county.

Talk about it. Once you have educated yourself, talk with your children. Make sure they know that you are a safe person to talk to about any concerns they have about their bodies. Don't use scare tactics, and don't shy away from uncomfortable topics. Keep open lines of communication with your children. Children begin hearing about sexuality from their peers between 9 and 11 years old. Start the conversation earlier so you are the person who introduces the topic. Don't wait.

Write down this number: 1-800-252-5400. Memorize it. Save it in your phone. Post it on the fridge. This is the number for the state's child abuse reporting hotline. If you do nothing else, save this number. Should you suspect a child is being abused – your own child included – call the hotline and make a report. Reports made to the hotline may remain confidential. Making a report sets off a chain reaction that allows abused and neglected children to get the help they need to heal as soon as possible and ensures a non-threatening, child-focused response to abuse. Help is available. You are not alone.

When it doubt, make a report. Know that because of your actions, a child will be better protected and justice will be possible. Look up and not away if you think a child is being harmed. You just may be the only voice that child has.

Lynne McLean is the CEO of Children's Advocacy Center of Collin County, caccollincounty.org.



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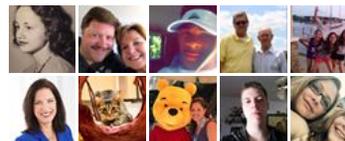
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